

## Research Note:

### 'A dragon? A firework? A kite?: seeing, the stain, and the Field of the Cloth of Gold'

Andrew Hill  
CRESC, The Open University

It is the afternoon of Saturday 23 June 1520, the penultimate day of the Field of the Cloth of Gold - the great meeting between Henry VIII of England and Francis I of France on the edge of the English held Pale of Calais, between Ardres and Guines, in the Val D'Or. The final mass of the meeting is taking place when something is sighted in the skies above.

Jacobius Sylvius', in his narrative poem recounting the meeting, provides the most detailed description of this incident:

Its eyes blaze, and with quivering tongue it licks its mouth, which opens wide; the dragon hisses through its gaping jowls. Its monstrous head bristles with bloody crests, the rest of its body skims the boundless air behind. It makes a sound as it advances over the earth, with rustling wings, while with its great body it cleaves a path through the air. Its long tail, acting as a tiller, now dips down, now rises up, according to the direction of the breeze. Now it enfolds itself in circles of varying size, with mighty coils, and, compacted, twists itself into a swift spiral. Now it winds its scaly back in a huge fold; now it seems to sink, now to fly further upwards; just as the empty ship, while it is suspended over the surging ocean, is tossed to and fro, and with a bound seeks now the heights, now the depths. Heavy with its long bulk it swims slowly through the empty ether, rowing with its wings and with the assistance of its feet.

At first their faces pale at the sight ... the crowd, terrified, scatters, seized with panic. Whether by means of the wind stirring in the hollow recesses of its belly, wind which the dragon draws in through its gaping mouth, or by means of a wagon pulling from afar a thin cable, it already occupies the space next to Guines, without mishap. It comes to rest: just as a bird gliding in the peaceful air skirms its liquid way and on the ground no longer uses its wings as oars<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup>Sylvius, Jacobius (1991) 'Francisi Francorum regis et Henrici Anglorum colluquium', *Renaissance Studies* 5(1-2), 48-103, 95-97.

What was it that had been seen? What was it that had struck such terror into the crowds assembled below?

Multiple claims were made at the time about what this thing might be and what its appearance was supposed to mean: that it was an actual dragon or similar beast such as a salamander; that it was a comet; that it was a sign, a portent as to what the meeting would give rise to; that it was a firework, or hot air balloon; or that as Sylvius declares, it was a kite.

The fascination with what this thing was has continued to the present, with claims that it was a firework, refuted with evidence that it must have indeed been a kite<sup>2</sup>. And while there is broad agreement that whatever it was that was seen was something that had been launched by the English, the reasons for its appearance at all, let alone at this moment, remain unclear. Was it intentional? Had it been an accident?

In this note I want to draw out the questions the appearance of this dragon raises for how the Field of the Cloth of Gold was seen and understood by the participants who assembled there, and for our later understandings of this extraordinary event.

My point of departure is the relationship of this dragon to the spectacle of the Field of the Cloth of Gold and the centrality of the role spectacle and display played in the conduct of contemporary diplomacy.

The event had been Cardinal Wolsey's idea, acting on behalf of both Henry and Francis. At once a diplomatic encounter, a co-celebration of the reigns of the two Kings and a declaration of their love for one another, its aim was to herald a new era of peace and accord between England and France after years of war and mutual suspicion.

From the 5 to 24 June the two Kings, accompanied by hundreds of their nobles, came together at this 'neutral' site on the boundaries of their territories to talk, feast, joust and dance. The sheer number of the hundreds of tents and pavilions used to house both sides was to strike observers as wondrous. Not only did the scale of the meeting stagger though, these tents and pavilions included structures so marvellous and fantastical they drew the awe of observers from across Europe. Even by the standards of contemporary diplomacy it is clear this event was something extraordinary.

The guiding aim of the vast resources and energy devoted by both sides to the spectacular dimensions of the meeting was the desire to create a vision of harmony and accord between England and France, which would herald a new era of peace between the two countries. This desire was married with a fundamental tenet of contemporary diplomacy, to assert the magnificence of the regimes involved. Extensive planning and preparation went into attempting to ensure this vision of peace could be sustained across the course of the meeting, in the face of the history of enmity between the two powers and the obsession with questions of precedence and prestige in contemporary diplomatic relations. To this end negotiations ranged over such fundamentals as where the meeting should be held, to the details of the initial encounter between the two

---

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Bamforth (<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/modern-languages/staff/stephen.bamforth>) takes issue with the claim made in 'The Seven Ages of Britain - Age of Power', 30 September, 2010, BBC4, that this was a firework, rather than a kite.

Kings, and the specifics of the myriad rituals and ceremonies that were to occur across the course of the meeting.

At the same time the awareness of the significance of the visibility of what took place at the Field of the Cloth of Gold is evident in the careful stage management of myriad aspects of the meeting, from the jousting and games to the banquets and festivities to more formal ceremonies. (Although precisely who should have access to see what varied between specific elements of the meeting). As Shakespeare has the Duke of Norfolk declare, in the discussion of the Field of the Cloth of Gold he opens *King Henry VIII* with, here 'order gave each thing view'<sup>3</sup>. But this is evident in more unlikely ways as well, as in the case of the structure that was almost universally regarded as the most impressive at the meeting - Henry's principal residence, 'the English Palace' - that was opened up to guided tours that it seems almost anyone could take part in.

The appearance of this dragon doesn't fit with these ambitions though. It introduces an element into this carefully ordered spectacle that's unintended, that shouldn't it seems be there. That people weren't expecting and didn't know how to make sense of. Indeed, as Sylvius's account makes clear, this dragon constituted a presence that generated considerable panic, unease and alarm amongst the participants and observers gathered below - the affective opposites of the peace and accord the meeting was intended to enact. And in so doing - and in demonstrating how something as slight and fleeting, as stray and random as this dragon could serve to disrupt the spectacle of the meeting - the appearance of this dragon draws attention to the profound limits and fragility of this spectacle.

The capacity of this dragon to disrupt the spectacle of the meeting is evident not just in Sylvius' poem though. It's rendered visible in the painting, *The Field of the Cloth of Gold*, that hangs in Hampton Court Palace, that provides perhaps the best known and most detailed visual depiction of the meeting, and which provides the only (extant) visualisation of the appearance of this dragon<sup>4</sup>.



---

<sup>3</sup> *King Henry VIII* 1.1.43-44.

<sup>4</sup> Both the artist(s) and the year of production are uncertain, but this painting may be a late sixteenth century copy of an earlier fresco from the 1530s. See Roy Strong (1995) *The Tudor and Stuart Monarchy: pageantry, painting and iconography: volume I*, London, Boydell, 24.

This work draws together a number of key elements of the meeting, including, the arrival of Henry (on horseback) accompanied by his nobles and their vast retinue; the English Palace (in the mid-right); the much anticipated, initial interview and embrace between Henry and Francis (top centre, in a tent made from cloth of gold); and the jousting and games that occupied so much of the meeting (top right). And alongside these aspects of the meeting, prominent in the top left hand corner of the painting, is the dragon.

While this painting offers an idealised, highly stylised portrayal of the meeting, it was produced with the intention of providing a record of the Field of the Cloth of Gold, and it's been interrogated in terms of its verisimilitude and its value as a source for understanding the meeting<sup>5</sup>. The presence of this dragon provokes the question, what is this otherworldly beast doing here? Why's it been included? What's going on? If we're supposed to accept that a dragon really did appear in the skies above, how much veracity should we attach to what's seen elsewhere in this work? And this in turn raises the question: what then was really seen at the meeting?

In constituting an element that doesn't seem to fit with what's seen elsewhere in this painting - or at the meeting itself - this dragon can be said to constitute what Lacan calls a 'blot' or 'stain', that obscure, disruptive element in the field of the visible, that forces us to question the nature of what's seen there<sup>6</sup>. In so doing this dragon performs a dual function. It functions as an emblem or metonym for - and serves to draw our attention towards - a series of other disruptions to and ruptures in the intended spectacle of the meeting that have otherwise been overlooked or marginalised in accounts and depictions of the Field of the Cloth of Gold, including in Sylvius' poem and the Hampton Court painting. But it also raises questions about the status of seeing as an epistemological device and how what's seen is understood and made sense of.

In terms of disruptions to the spectacle of the meeting, I want to highlight three instances of the way this occurred.

Firstly, there is the weather. Sylvius' account of the meeting attempts to portray it as blessed by continuous good weather. Yet in a series of other narratives, storms and high winds are identified as presenting a significant source of interference to the meeting. These resulted in Francis's principal pavilion having to be taken down after only four days - the sense of injustice and anger at the way this added to the structure being eclipsed by the English Palace isn't clear. In addition, the Bishop of Rochester, in a sermon highly critical of the Field of the Cloth of Gold, drew attention to the dust storms that bedevilled the meeting and served, he claimed, to obscure the observer's view of what was taking place, to the extent that for significant portions of the meeting, 'scantly one myghet se another'. (And at the same time the appearance of this poor weather was taken as a portent of something greater. As Hall recounts in his *Chronicles*, on 18 June storms resulted in none of the planned festivities being able to be take place on that day which saw a 'hideous tempest' that 'some said ... was a very pronosticacion of trouble & hatred to come between the two princes'<sup>7</sup>).

---

<sup>5</sup> As SydneyAnglo has done (1966) 'The Hampton Court painting of the Field of the Cloth of Gold', *The Antiquaries Journal*, 46 (2) 287-307.

<sup>6</sup> That's introduced in Jacques Lacan *Seminar X: Anxiety* (1962-3), unpublished, translated by Cormac Gallagher.

<sup>7</sup> Hall, Edward (1809) *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustrate Families of Lancastre and Yorke*. London, 616. In the light of these observations it's worth noting Strong's comments on the shift towards indoor spectacles that came to pre-dominate towards the end of the sixteenth century, 'where visual effects can

Secondly, there is the presence at the meeting of the crowds who flocked from the surrounding countryside. The, in the words of Hall, 'vacaboundes, plowmen, labourers & of the bragery, wagoners & beggers' that assembled there and 'for drunkenness lay in routes and heapes'<sup>8</sup>, and whose dishevelled presence, as Hall suggests, served to disrupt the vision of co-magnificence the meeting was intended to enact. And it's worth considering how the presence of these figures might be read as emblematic of the broader populace of France, and indeed England, and the challenge the awareness of the material conditions of the broader populations of the two countries makes to the image of magnificence the two powers sought to project at the Field of the Cloth of Gold.

Thirdly, there is the long history of tensions and rivalries between England and France, which the meeting was intended as heralding an end to. It's perhaps not surprising that these rivalries found their way into the spectacle of the meeting, as evident in the air of intense competition - that contemporary observers were all too aware of - over whether Henry or Francis' principal pavilion was the more impressive. And yet, the meeting seems to have passed off without these tensions being directly articulated, except that is for one notable incident. On Wednesday 13 June, after a wrestling match between English and French teams - that the French had been victorious in - Henry challenges Francis to wrestle him, initiating a confrontation between the two monarchs which had been carefully avoided in the games up to that point. Francis gave Henry 'un tour de Bretagne', throwing him to the ground in a spectacular fall which left Henry bitter and humiliated<sup>9</sup>. Michelet attaches considerable significance to 'this trivial yet fatal event', which he saw as having 'incalculable consequences' for Anglo-French relations, in both the short and longer term<sup>10</sup>. Even if Michelet's diagnosis appears somewhat sweeping it's clear this incident marked a break or rupture in the vision of peace so much effort had been expended upon achieving, bringing to the fore, in the very direct and hugely symbolic form of a physical confrontation between the two Kings, the tensions the spectacle of the meeting had been directed towards negating and containing.

In thinking about how the presence of this dragon serves to invoke this series of disruptions it's worth considering the extent to which the uncertainty about what this dragon was and what it signified allowed it to appear in accounts of the meeting that seek to idealise what took place there - such as Sylvius' narrative and the Hampton Court painting - when these other, more direct disruptions to the spectacle of the meeting don't appear there.

But there's another sense in which the appearance of this dragon serves to raise questions about how the meeting was seen and understood by the participants and observers assembled there. This is in regard to the status of seeing as an epistemological device, of how what's seen is understood and the type of knowledge seeing gives rise to. And it's the way in which this dragon performs this double function,

---

be more easily controlled, where the eyes of the spectator can be almost forced to look at things in a certain way'. See Strong, Roy (1973) *Splendours at Court: Renaissance Spectacle and Illusion*. London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 73.

<sup>8</sup> Hall, 620.

<sup>9</sup> Anglo, Sydney (1997) *Spectacle, Pageantry and Early Tudor Policy*. Oxford, Clarendon, 154.

<sup>10</sup> Russell, Jocelyne (1969) *The Field of the Cloth of Gold: men and manners in 1520*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 132.

of invoking both the disruptions to this spectacle and these epistemological concerns, that positions it as so revealing about the Field of the Cloth of Gold.

As indicated above, the appearance of this dragon provoked - and still does provoke - debate about precisely what it was that was seen, and how the appearance of whatever it was that was seen should be made sense of. In so doing its appearance foregrounds questions about the status of seeing as a means of understanding the world that were already prominent in contemporary discourses about vision, and which were to reach their apogee in the following century. As Stuart Clarke traces in *Vanities of the Eye* these uncertainties emanated from a number of sources: from philosophy (most radically in the guise of a neo-Pyrrhonian ultra-scepticism); religion (including the devil's facilities as an illusionist); discourses on melancholia and mental health; debates about the existence of ghosts; in how dreams were understood; and from questions raised by the science of optics<sup>11</sup>.

When applied to the Field of the Cloth of Gold these doubts and concerns serve to raise deep seated questions around the terms in which the spectacle of the meeting was encountered, visually, by the participants gathered there, including: how they made sense of what they saw; how much this conformed to the intended aims of the meeting; and whether the meeting wasn't regarded as anything more than a fabulous, fantastical mirage, a feast for the senses that existed for this sequence of days and then was gone.

In broaching these questions it's worth considering how this dragon might be configured as a type of anamorphic image - of that kind that attracted such interest from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries - that in its distorted form confronts the observer with the very question of what it is they see. In the Hampton Court painting this dragon is pictured unfurled. Yet as it twists and turns in the sky, as it in Sylvius' words 'enfolds itself in circles of varying size, with mighty coils, and compacted, twists itself into a spiral', and as the observers below try to work out what it is they are seeing and what it's supposed to signify, this dragon assumes the profile of just such an anamorphic device.

A dragon? A comet? A firework? A kite? One of these things perhaps, but something else as well - a portent. For in invoking the limits, fragilities and instability of the spectacular dimensions of the meeting, this dragon portends the all too rapid collapse of the vision of peace and accord the Field of the Cloth of Gold was intended to enact.

Almost immediately after the meeting had taken place the French began to fortify the village of Ardres - the base of their camp at the Field of the Cloth of Gold, on the borders of the English Pale - with the very timber that had been used to construct their pavilions. Wolsey's complaint (in August of 1520) resulted in this work coming to a halt. But by 1522 Henry had joined Charles V's alliance against Francis, and England and France were at war again. What had the Field of the Cloth of Gold been beyond a gigantic exercise in the folly of believing in what's seen?

---

<sup>11</sup> Clark, Stuart (2007) *Vanities of the eye: vision in early modern European culture*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

How then does the above relate to 'the baroque'?

In a number of ways -

The concern to locate ambiguity and allegory at the centre of how we make sense of the Field of the Cloth of Gold. And in taking a seemingly marginal, transient element of this meeting as a point of focus and exploring the meeting from a concern, first of all, with this marginal element.

But also in regard to baroque conceptions of the visual:

In terms of conceiving of the relationship between politics and the visual in which the visual is not simply something that can be interpreted as structured by, is a symptom of, or is secondary to politics, but rather, the visual is at the very core of politics, a primary domain in which politics takes place. This is an attitude that entails the collapsing of a split between politics and the visual. (This is evident perhaps most obviously in the extraordinary efforts made and resources devoted by political and religious regimes in the baroque era to assert and confirm their authority and legitimacy at the level of the visual, in the guise of art and architecture as well as in the form of court spectacles, festivals and theatre).

But at the same time (and as at first glance in seeming contradiction to this) ...

The profound doubts expressed in the baroque era about the status of seeing as an epistemological device. The questioning of the stability of seeing as a means of understanding the world, and of the type of knowledge seeing gives rise to. The fascination with the relationship between illusion and reality, as manifest in the interest in trompe l'oeil and anamorphosis.

These attitudes to the visual are foreshadowed in the period preceding the baroque in which the Field of the Cloth of Gold takes place. What questions does this raise about the identity of 'the baroque' and what's specific to it?

As the case of the Field of the Cloth of Gold makes clear. It's not simply the case that we might employ a baroque sensibility to exploring what comes after the baroque era, but also what pre-dates it.